

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 19, 2004

Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240

begin_of_the_skype_highlighting

□

□□

□□□□□□

□□□

□□ (202) 523-3240

□□□□□

□

end_of_the_skype_highlighting

, ext. 27□

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the signing by President George W. Bush and the passage by the House and Senate of the North Korea Human Rights Act, which requires that official attention be paid to the ongoing human rights and humanitarian crises in that country.

“The North Korea Human Rights Act reflects many of the Commission's past recommendations, including authorizations for increasing radio broadcasts, supporting North Korean refugees, and programs to promote human rights in North Korea,” said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. “The human rights violations of the Kim Jong Il regime are among the most serious worldwide. The North Korea Human Rights Act makes improving human rights protections a priority in U.S. relations with North Korea. And, it gives U.S. policy-makers tools to act on that priority.”

The Commission has encouraged the governments participating in the Six-Party talks on nuclear security to consider how resolving North Korea's refugee and humanitarian crises could contribute to increased regional stability. Human rights issues, including religious freedom, should be part of comprehensive negotiations with North Korean leaders. Dealing with these issues is in the interests of the countries surrounding North Korea and the long-term security interests of the Korean peninsula.

The bill is timely because of the ongoing refugee crisis on the North Korea-China border. Between 100,000 to 300,000 North Korean refugees are living clandestinely in China. The Chinese have not allowed the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to interview North Koreans, despite China's obligations under the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol. The refugees constantly face the threat of deportation, with certain arrest, torture, and imprisonment awaiting them in North Korea. "The Commission has called on the Chinese government to uphold their international obligations and work with the UNHCR and other NGO groups in developing a process for assisting the refugees," said Bansal.

In the past several weeks, groups of North Korean refugees have sought asylum in the Canadian Embassy in Beijing and in Japanese and U.S. schools in Beijing and Shanghai. In the past, international attention caused by North Koreans seeking asylum at embassies led to mass deportations of refugees hiding on the border regions. The Commission is particularly concerned about the welfare of nine North Korean refugees who were removed from an American school in Shanghai earlier this week. The school administrators turned over the asylum seekers to Chinese authorities.

"Given the dangers that face North Koreans forcibly returned from China to the DPRK, China should not summarily deport asylum seekers, but allow the UNHCR to determine impartially their status and the validity of their asylum claims," said Bansal. "The recent treatment of asylum seekers demonstrates the dire protection needs of North Koreans in China. The Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should urge the Chinese government to abide by the Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol by giving the UNHCR unrestricted access to potential asylum seekers who may require international protection."

For the past five years, the Commission has recommended that North Korea be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The State Department has followed the Commission's recommendations and designated North Korea as a CPC since 2000.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Felicia Bansal

, ,